

Beowulf – Proselytism Practised and Subverted

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Abstract

All literacy in the England of the Old English Period (c. 450 – c. 1100 A.D.) is Christian literacy, as it was primarily the clergy which could read and write. Beowulf is the only long narrative poem from the period that portrays pre-Christian characters and events. The paper, through close reading of key passages from the poem, examines the complexity in the poem's portrayal of pagan heroism and piety. The discussion takes it as given that Beowulf was given its current form and written down in a Christian monastery, and the narration is undeniably from a Christian perspective. Nevertheless, its composers retained enough respect for their heathen ancestry to depict its heroic characters with admiration for their piety which they subtly dissociated from any particular body of doctrine. There is even a pretence of condemning the specific practice of idol worship in an attempt to divert the attention of censorious Church fathers from the poem's essentially pagan content. Therefore, Beowulf, with its open-minded look at a pre-Christian civilization, appeals to an Indian readership that will include inheritors of a living pagan religion and culture.

Keywords: Paganism, Christian Piety, Proselytism, Subversion.

Introduction

One wonders how many Old English poems dealing with Germanic legend and history perished in the wake of Alcuin thundering in his 797 letter to Bishop Higbald of Lindisfarne, “*Quid enim Hiniildus cum Christo?*”, “For what has Ingeld to do with Christ?”, when he questioned the interest of Christian monks in heroic legends.¹ *The Finnesburh Fragment* and the similarly fragmentary *Waldere* may be accidental

survivals of longer poems that were perhaps discarded, being considered unworthy of preservation in the new religious milieu.

This paper would like to argue that *Beowulf*-poet/s,² in what is, in Old English, the sole complete verse narrative of unambiguously pre-Christian characters and events, tried to circumvent Alcuin's proscription in a unique, aesthetically unsatisfactory, and, therefore,

¹ Edward B. Irving Jr., in Bjork, Robert E and John. D. Niles. *A Beowulf Handbook*. Exeter. University of Exeter Press. 1997. Paperback 1998. 185, cites Donald A. Bullough's 1993 article “What Has Ingeld to Do with Lindisfarne” which argues that Alcuin's letter was not intended for monks at Lindisfarne or elsewhere but directed at a more secular “mixed” audience at a bishop's feast.

² It has been established that two scribes wrote down the poem. Cf. *Beowulf*. Edited with an introduction, notes and new prose translation by Michael Alexander. Manchester & New York. Manchester University Press & Barnes & Noble Books. 1978. Rpt. 1982. Introduction. 2. The plural pronoun is used for the poets to leave the question of actual composition open.

intriguing manner which perhaps enabled the poem to survive in its entirety. Their method seems worthy of scrutiny.

Contradictions between Christian and Pre-Christian Elements in *Beowulf*

The attack of Grendel on Heorot is made to seem provoked initially by the sound of a human community rejoicing in the hall. The poet/s, through their ordering of occurrences, seem/s to suggest that the monster's ire is further exacerbated by Hrothgar's minstrel singing of how the Almighty created the earth. This impression is confirmed by the audience being told that Grendel's anger is that of the outcast as he is the descendant of the first murderer Cain whom God drove far away from mankind. Accordingly, Grendel inhabits the moors, the fen, and the fastness (*fæsten*), and emerges from these regions to wreak havoc in the human habitation of Hrothgar and his retainers. Grendel's Mother attacks Heorot after Beowulf tears off Grendel's arm. Devastated by this recurring misfortune after the relief of Grendel having been driven off to die, Hrothgar, who lacks the Christian omniscience of the poet/s, unambiguously declares regarding Grendel:

no hie fæder cunnon,
hwæper him ænig wæs ær acenned
dynra gæsta. (ll. 1355^b – 1357^a)³

(They [Hrothgar's people, the Danes] did not know whether any father had been born for him from among the dark spirits.)

Small wonder, then, that the initial reaction of the Danish king and his counsellors to the depredations of Grendel had been to pray to the gods they knew:

³ All quotations are from *Beowulf*, Michael Alexander. See n. 2 above. The translations into modern English which follow are the author's.

Hwylum hie geheton æt hærgtrafum
wigweorþunga, wordum gebædon,
þæt him gastbona geoco gefremede
wið þeodþreaw. Swylc wæs þeaw hyra,
hæþenra hyht; helle gemundon
in modsefan; Metod hie ne cuþon
dæda Demend, ne wiston hie Drihten God
ne hie huru heofena Helm herian ne cuþon,
wuldres Wealdend. (ll. 175 – 183^a)

(Sometimes they took vows of idol-worship at heathen sanctuaries, prayed with explicit words that the slayer of souls would grant them help in this great calamity. Such was their custom, the hope of the heathens. They thought of hell in their hearts. They knew not the Maker, the Judge of deeds, nor did they know the Lord God, nor indeed knew they how to praise the Protector of the heavens, the Ruler of glory.)

It is most likely that these lines have replaced the account, with names, of the deities the pre-Christian Danes prayed to in some earlier version of the poem. To leave such an account intact would have been impossible in the Christian monastery where the poem received its surviving form. To ensure further that the likes of Alcuin did not consign the manuscript to the fire, the poet/s add/s the following lines to placate such figures of authority:

Wa bið þæm ðe sceal
þurh sliðne nið sawle bescufan
in fyres fæþm, frofre ne wenan,
wihte gewendan! Wel bið þæm þe mot
æfter deaðdæge Drihten secean
ond to Fæder fæþmum freoðo wilnian.

(ll. 183^b – 188)

(Woe shall betide the one who, through extreme evil, will shove his soul into the embrace of fire; he must not expect anything at all to change. Well shall it be for the one who is able, after the day of death, to seek the Lord, and desire protection in the Father's embrace.)

As was done earlier after the account of Grendel's ancestry, it is necessary once again to move forward in the narrative to Hrothgar's reaction when he is told that Beowulf has arrived:

Hine halig God

for arstafum us onsende

to West-Denum, þæs ic wen hæbbe,

wið Grendles gryre. (ll. 380^b – 383^a)

(Holy God, out of His mercy, has sent him to us, the West-Danes, against the terror of Grendel; I have expectation of that.)

This is in direct contradiction of the assertion that the Danes who prayed to their idols, must not expect any change in their current misfortune. Hrothgar, belonging to a pre-Christian world, expectedly hopes he is receiving divine help at last, except that he uses the word in its most general and fluid sense, which we would spell 'god' in modern English rather than 'God'. What is more, his expectation is fulfilled, not once, but twice, in the case of Grendel and then his Mother.⁴ Further, in the second half of the poem, Beowulf does die defending his people against the dragon.

⁴ Therefore, Edward Irving Jr. is wrong in bracketing the idol-worshipping Danes with 'extreme cases of wickedness' (191) who, according to him, 'unmistakably go to hell' (191) like the hell-dwelling cannibalistic Grendel, or even the brother-slayer Unferth (Beowulf says he will suffer in hell for that act, ll. 587-89^a).

But this is not before he, admittedly for the first time in his three encounters with monsters, with the unasked-for yet crucial help of his retainer Wiglaf, destroys the beast, as he had Grendel and Grendel's Mother. If the poet/s or scribes wished to beat the drum for the new religion against the old, they would surely have made some insertion at an opportune moment to show that whatever instance of poetic justice there is in the poem is due at least in part to the newly-found faith of some, if not all, the characters in the Christian God.

Implications of Such Contradictions

Eric Stanley asserted that 'though a heathen may be virtuous, his life, being without faith is, in the strictest sense of the words, without hope.'⁵ The pronouncements about afterlife in the poem are far too ambiguous to warrant such an assertion, no matter how categorical it may seem to a committed Christian, or even to a secular one. At the beginning of the poem, the Danish king Scyld Scefing is given a ship-burial, and this is what is said about his ultimate destiny:

Men ne cunnon

secgan to soðe, selerædende,

hæleð under heofenum, hwa þæm hlæste onfeng. (ll. 50^b – 52)

(Men, hall-counsellors, warriors under the skies, did not know, to tell the truth, who received that cargo.)

At the end of the poem the poet is even less non-committal when it comes to the moment of

⁵ E. G. Stanley. 'Hæpenra Hyht in Beowulf'. Rpt. from the Brodeur Festschrift in Stanley. *A Collection of Papers with Emphasis on Old English Literature*. Toronto. Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies. 192-208. The quotation is from 208.

Beowulf's death which is to be followed by a cremation:

him of hræðre gewat
sawol secean soðfæstra dom. (2819^b
– 2820)

(Out of his breast the soul departed to seek
the judgment of those firm in truth.)

If the poet/s were as convinced as Stanley is that to be heathen is sin enough, they would have surely, at these points, consigned Scyld and Beowulf to hell, perhaps sorrowfully, but unequivocally all the same. As Edward Irving Jr. points out, the last two words, *soðfæstra dom*, 'occur elsewhere in clear religious contexts and normally refer to the favorable [*sic*] judgment made on the virtuous at the time of their death, usually implying their admission to heaven ...'. The body of the hero *bæl cure*, / *hate heaðowylmas*, (ll. 2818^b -2819^a) 'chose the fire, the hot hateful flames'. His soul, 'however, escapes this fate ... But, if he is not a Christian, how can his soul enter heaven?'⁶ The answer, says Irving Jr., is 'the poet's casual assumption that so good and great a king obviously deserves heaven ... whatever ecclesiastical bureaucrats may say.'⁷

The presence of homiletic commonplaces in Hrothgar's 'Sermon', which he delivers to Beowulf after the latter has killed Grendel and Grendel's Mother, has been discussed elsewhere.⁸ But, as Stanley points out, such strong echoes of Christianity notwithstanding, 'the references in the speeches of Hrothgar and Beowulf are a clear indication that the poet wished to present them as

men who had piety ... and at the same time [the poet] detached them from any specific, organized body of religious doctrine.'⁹ The virtues advocated in Hrothgar's 'Sermon' are, in fact, not exclusive to Christianity, but an equally natural part of pagan morality. The Christian echoes in some ways reinforce this awareness. The Danes are shown to be pagans. There is no reason to believe the Geats, the tribe to which Beowulf belongs, are any different. As stated earlier, the actual act of pagan worship had to be condemned in the prevalent atmosphere in England during the Old English period following the Christianization of the kingdoms. The poem indulges in its admiration of pagan virtue when it can be portrayed independently of any specific body of doctrine.

Future Attitudes towards Pagans in European Literature

Several centuries after *Beowulf*, with medieval Christianity perhaps at its apex, a greater poet, writing like the composer/s of the Old English poem, in the vernacular of his country, was to create a limbo for virtuous pagans in his *Commedia*, popularly known as *The Divine Comedy*. This limbo is without actual suffering, but also with utter hopelessness, and clearly located in Dante's 'Inferno'. Those who gave *Beowulf* the form in which we have it were far closer temporally to their pagan ancestry. While they were steeped deeply enough in the new religion to imbue the poem with strong Christian elements, they were open-minded enough to recognize that pagan virtue anticipated many of the requirements of Christian ethics. Hence, we may say that while the poem indulges in proselytism when referring to the actual act of pagan worship, it subverts the same act when it comes to the depiction of pagan heroism and merit detached from specifically heathen practices.

⁶ *A Beowulf Handbook*, 191.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Prodosh Bhattacharya. 'Hrothgar's "Sermon" in *Beowulf*'. *Journal of the Department of English*. University of Calcutta. Mediaeval Number. Vol. XXII. Nos. 1 & 2. 1986-87. 148-60.

⁹ Stanley. 194.

Conclusion

It is this indulgence followed by subversion that makes *Beowulf* of unique interest to the author of this article, as he is the inheritor of a living pagan civilization and culture that has not been supplanted by a different culture and spiritual philosophy. It is a strangely open-minded poem when compared with Dante's greater spiritual epic. The poem embodies the reaction of minds to their recent past in the light of a present that considered that past to be totally negative. The poet/s is/are unable to fully accept this judgment.

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